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guest commentary

Recreation fees help national parks

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Hikers, backpackers and others who make the trek along some of the hundreds of miles of Colorado trails in Rocky Mountain National Park and Arapaho-Roosevelt national forests experience breathtaking scenery year-round. Whether observing an eagle from a summer campsite, photographing elk in a golden aspen forest in autumn or skiing in a tranquil winter forest, visitors have adventures that provide lifelong memories.

The entrance fee for a family driving into Rocky Mountain National Park is \$20 for a week or \$35 for a year. For \$20 or less, the same family can enjoy the spectacular beauty of the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, Yellowstone or many other national parks for an entire week. Though a small price to pay for a priceless vacation, these fees enhance visitor opportunities, helping foot the bill for everything from maintaining trails to upgrading exhibits.

Rocky Mountain National Park, for example, is completing a \$250,000 project funded by entrance and campground fees to repair and replace more than 100 worn or outdated wayside and trailhead enclosures. Likewise, in Arapaho-Roosevelt, funds have been used to assist in construction of a new visitor's center. The Bureau of Land Management's Anasazi Heritage Center has used fee revenues to assist in funding special events including a gallery exhibit of basket weaving and development of Canyons of the Ancients National Monument curricula.

As reasonable as these fees are, some critics want them abolished. This would be a great mistake.

The idea that visitors should contribute to the upkeep of facilities they use is not new. Many national parks have charged fees since their establishment decades ago, and 46 states currently charge fees at their state recreation facilities. (Last fiscal year, for example, the state of Colorado raised \$16.5 million in recreation fees.) In 1996, Congress authorized federal agencies on a trial basis to charge people a small fee at national parks, wildlife refuges, national forests, and other recreational areas and use them to provide direct benefits to public lands visitors. Whereas fees collected in the past were transferred to the U.S. Treasury, Congress mandated that 80 percent of the funds be spent at the sites where they were collected as a way of maintaining and enhancing visitor facilities and services.

The recreation fee program has been an enormous success. The funds raised by the fees - some \$170 million in 2004 - proved invaluable to managers as they served ever-increasing numbers of people, especially at wildlife refuges and at some lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, where visitation and recreation soared in the late 1990s.

The program worked so well that Congress last year passed the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which authorizes the collection of recreation fees for the next 10 years at sites that have visitor facilities. These facilities include maintained trails, boat ramps, hunting blinds, toilet facilities and interpretive signs and programs.

The law also calls on federal agencies to develop a national "America the Beautiful Pass" that people can choose to buy to get access to all recreational areas where fees are collected.

A key provision of the new law requires that fees only be charged in areas that have visitor facilities or services. As a result, the Forest Service has eliminated fees at more than 400 areas, including selected sites in Colorado.

Congress required that federal agencies work with state agencies and local communities to oversee fee collection programs. The public will have an opportunity to participate in the decisionmaking process before the establishment of any new fees.

Most Americans recognize that they should pay a fee for some government services and facilities. Taxpayers support the State Department but also pay a \$60 fee to get a passport. Taxpayers pay for road construction, but many state governments charge tolls on turnpikes and bridges. Most people recognize that those who use these facilities and services should pay a nominal fee to support them.

Americans expect the best from our parks, refuges, national forests and other public lands. Recreation fees help ensure we can provide the best facilities and services possible on our public lands.

Gale Norton is secretary of the Interior.